

TRANSCENDENT PSI

by MICHAEL GROSSO

In D. Scott Rogo's 'Miracles' (1982) we meet with phenomena that concern the parapsychology of religion—for instance, Marian visions, stigmata, the Shroud of Turin, blood prodigies, inedia, levitation, healings at religious shrines, phenomena of incorruption, and so forth.

But mainstream parapsychology has for the most part neglected psi in a religious setting. There are good historical and methodological reasons for this. A discipline struggling to achieve status in the scientific community runs the risk of incurring a kind of guilt by association with religion; hostile critics already associate psi science with magic, and other disreputable pursuits. But there is also the question of methodology. It is hard, if not impossible, to catch religious psi working in the laboratory. Much of the best material (e.g., the levitations of Saint Joseph of Copertino) is based on unique historical circumstances, and can scarcely be thought of as 'replicable' in the normal scientific sense. There is also the problem of obtaining cooperation in research of this sort. In my own attempts to obtain impartial testimony from disciples of Muktananda (and from Muktananda himself) as well as from the monks of San Giovanni Rotondo (regarding Padre Pio), I found myself being subtly manoeuvred into a spiritual 'experiment' not of my own devising. Despite such problems psi deserves to be looked at in the context of religious experience.

The question of meaning is paramount. Guessing cards, trying to influence random event generators, and so forth, can in no way compare with the rich context of meaning, emotion, symbol, need, hope, and expectation, in which spontaneous religious psi flourishes. Rogo's book makes this fact clear by describing the context, the history, the drama of the events in El Zeiton, Fatima, the Naples Cathedral, and other scenes of striking psi events.

Psi in a religious context is psi undergirded by the passions of transcendence and resonant with the numinous power of archetypes—a condition C. G. Jung said might lead to psi happenings. (He doesn't explain *how*, but some fresh thinking along these lines comes in a recent paper by Ullman (1983). The laboratory, in contrast with the religious setting, is an abstraction of life. Laboratory procedures stress control and quantification; but one of the best predictors of psi is spontaneity, and the key variables in the psi process are psychological. The laboratory is probably the ideal condition for destroying the psi process—not for all but perhaps for the most gifted subjects, especially the spiritually gifted. They would be apt to rebel against the objectivity of experimental procedures; doubt would be an adversary to success in their own transcendent experiment. Padre Pio, the antipodes of Descartes, once said: 'Doubt is the ruin of the world'. Such contempt for the sceptical intellect is at odds with the normal scientific enterprise. The shaman is wary of the scientist, and yet ironically he may hold the secrets of psi the scientist craves to know. The point, of course, is not to disparage the achievement of experimental parapsychology but to suggest that psi in its 'natural' religious environment be looked at more closely.

Consider paranormal group dynamics. Researchers have long focused on the state-dependency of the psi process; but this, along with personality studies, has mainly dealt with individuals. Paranormal group dynamics remains a nascent area of study. Rōgo has used data from poltergeist group dynamics to interpret some of the 'miracles' he has studied. One may disagree on particulars, but the overall approach, stressing the social dynamics, is important; and Rogo has, in my view, provided fresh insights on what might be involved in large scale psi effects. (See especially the chapters on Saint Januarius and Remiremont.)

Rogo concludes that saintly psi seems to be 'so much greater and more consistent' than that of subjects usually studied by researchers. This fact, he suggests, may be due to sensitivity to a 'spiritual realm' (p. 314). Similiar views were expressed by Thurston (1952, p. 1) and more recently by White (1981) and by myself in a short paper on Padre Pio (Grosso, 1982).

THE HYPOTHESIS OF TRANSCENDENT PSI

Let us then assume that (let's call it) *spiritual* or *transcendent* psi is demonstrably 'greater'—more consistent, greater in magnitude and variety of effects, —than secular psi. If true, such a fact would be theoretically important to parapsychology. Good working models have been advanced to account for psi: models based on the concept of need, altered states, personality variables, and so on. But if it is true that the magnitude, quality, and consistency of psi is linked to the dynamics of spiritual life, it is something that deserves our attention. How would the picture look once we seriously assumed the reality of an order of high-grade spiritual psi?

MEDIUMSHIP AND TRANSCENDENT PSI

Perhaps the strongest objection to the idea of a superior spiritual psi lay in the performance of the great mediums, Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Leonard, and the like. After all, weren't they doing their thing in a secular setting? The answer is that although (say) Mrs. Piper might not qualify for sainthood according to the rules of the Catholic Church, her lifelong and self-effacing devotion to psychical research, her service as a medium, and above all, the routine surrender of her egocentric consciousness in the process of trance mediumship, adds up to a type of spiritual behaviour. Further, the orientation of the great mediums—like that of the great saints—is always otherworldly. In this sense we may talk of the *transcendent* function of psi: among the saints the supreme transcendent object is God; among the mediums it is discarnate persons, 'controls', spirit guides, and, in general, the world of the unseen. It is as though (our hypothesized) high-grade psi were a byproduct of a peculiar interaction between an ego-submerged organism and a transcendent target. When psi functions in a nontranscendent context the results appear by contrast to become 'low-grade', weak, transient, and inconsistent.

But should this be so surprising? Psi, by definition, is a nonsensory mode of interaction. Compared with the ordinary senses, it is worthless as a means of *reliable* adaptation to the physical environment. I stress the factor of *reliability*. There is no doubt that psi occasionally functions 'instrumentally' in reponse to the needs of organisms. In Stevenson's (1970) study of telepathic impressions, for

instance, several good examples are described in detail. In the great majority of spontaneous cases, however, it is by no means obvious what purpose, if any, psi serves in assisting the survival tasks of the organism. Of course, it is possible to speculate *ad hoc* on needs that may have been served, whenever psi occurs. But such speculation would not alter my impression that psi's *primary* function is not reliably to assist the organism in adapting to the terrestrial environment. That purpose is served by sensory perception. One may deny that there is a primary or essential function of psi, but it is a question worth asking.

The following is one possible approach to this question. Assume that the human organism has two systems, sensory and extrasensory, for communicating with whatever is. Presumably, the sensory system is adapted to the needs of the sensory world; the extrasensory system, I propose, is adapted to the needs of an extrasensory world.

We may bracket any attempt to describe the nature or inhabitants of this extrasensory world, or its relation to our own immediate existence. But unless we are solipsists, it is reasonable to assume that the senses arose in response to an external sensory world; this leads me to conjecture that the extrasensory modalities also arose in response to an external *extrasensory* world, a world in substance more like thought than matter. The suggestion, moreover, is not altogether fantastic in view of the claims throughout human history of the existence of just such an extramundane world.

If psi's function is really transcendent in this sense, we might be less surprised to find it is so exiguous, almost self-cancelling, in the secular setting; or that it seems to wax stronger when the target systems are *extramundane*: the divine order (as with the saints) and the unseen order (as with the mediums).

The hypothesis of transcendent psi invites us to reflect on other data in new ways.

EGO-INVOLVING EFFORT AND TRANSCENDENCE

In studying the research literature, one gets a strong impression that ego-involving effort obstructs the psi task. Of course, there are mundane psychological reasons why wrong effort might block efficiency in any line of human endeavour. But the idea takes on added significance with psi: ego-involving effort strains toward mundane survival, affirmation of the sense-mediated organism. But if psi's main function is oriented toward an extrasensory world, then any effort toward preservation of ourselves in *this* world might inhibit psi functioning. And so the saints and adepts, individuals geared toward self-transcending goals, might be the sort of people who best catch psi on the wing. For such individuals would have renounced survival of their sense-mediated world as their primary aim, thus liberating the use of their psi potential, which, *ex hypothesi* serves the uses of the world beyond.

There is another way of making this point. Conditions known to be psi-conducive seem to be conditions at odds with adaptation to the sensory world. Consider, for example, Honorton's (1977) concluding claim based on a review of 80 experimental studies: 'Psi functioning is enhanced (i.e., is more easily detected and recognized) when the receiver is in a state of sensory relaxation and is minimally influenced by ordinary perception and proprioception'. The psi system of functioning, we might say, is inversely proportional to an

organism's *active* responsiveness to the external environment. It is when the sensory system is 'idling' with respect to the external world, that the extrasensory system, undistracted by the 'noise' of attending to the tasks of life, is disposed to function more efficiently. Honorton speaks of the 'reduction of exteroceptive input' and of the 'deployment of attention toward internal mentation processes' as psi optimizing. 'If you seek the truth', said Saint Augustine in a different time and context, 'go within'.

Certain key moments in the history of philosophy repeat themselves, each time providing fresh starting points for renewing thought. Descartes repeats the Augustinian act of turning within; Husserl too, from whom I borrowed the sentence of the great Latin father, also struggled to reinstate the autonomy of mind and the human subject. Parapsychology may be thought of as the latest expression, using the methods of science, of that renewing act of centroverson. Thus the path backward to Saint Augustine's spiritual truth and the forward path of Honorton's psi-optimizing procedures seem here to converge.

NEAR-DEATH AND TRANSCENDENCE

The dramatic shift of attention toward internal states is a kind of dying to the world. But what of actual dying or near-dying? If the function of psi is transcendent, shouldn't we expect psi ability to increase as an organism nears death? Deathbed visions and near-death experience do seem to generate a wide array of possible psi events and transpersonal states of consciousness: out-of-body experiences, PK and precognition—and also those transformative encounters with light beings and other *soi disant* messengers from other worlds. According to the present suggestion, we could say that in the near-death situation the transcendent communication system comes into play. We could say it *must* be activated as death approaches, since psi would be essential for survival in a transcendent world.

WITHIN-THE-WORLD-TRANSCENDENCE

Psi perhaps works best when it works against the grain of egocentric survival and self-affirmation. (Or, as in certain crisis situations when survival is gravely menaced.) Transcendent psi may also occur in covert ways subtly mingled with our normal mental processes. The philosopher C. D. Broad said that psi *interactions* may be going on continuously at undetectable levels of human experience. The point I wish to make is an extension of Broad's. These undetected psi-mediated behaviors may be oriented toward *self-transcendence*.

These could begin at a fairly low point on a continuum—for instance, in the qualities of sympathy, compassion, empathy. My guess is that real 'hits' here are as rare and fleeting as those one may observe in any parapsychological laboratory. 'Love', Myers (1903) once wrote, 'is a kind of exalted but unspecialized telepathy'. And indeed experience shows that sometimes communication is easy, tacit, subliminal; with others effort of the most exasperatingly explicit reasonableness is continually balked. Young lovers illustrate the former (with concessions to the inevitable decline effect); old experts at a disarmament conference the latter.

One could think of other examples of interpersonal relations in which transcendent psi may be at work. Musicians I know say there is often an element

of mediumship or telepathy in moments of high inspiration. The notes may be played perfectly—in pitch, rhythm, tempo; but there seems an extra ingredient without which performance is merely correct and comes short of inspired. The suggestion is that when we are released from the compulsion to self-preservation, and emerge toward a sphere of larger sympathies, transcendent psi comes into play.

Love, art—and what of the heroics of moral life? Perhaps here too we might detect the shadow of psi. Perhaps deeds of great courage or acts of great faith are better accounted for by transcendent psi, by the notion of something linking us to a greater mind, 'energy', or 'reality'. Certain actions go against the mechanical momentum of human inclinations, actions we might describe as spiritual. Indeed, certain *lives* tempt me to posit a different kind of 'cause' at work in the affairs of the world—a cause connecting us with a larger pattern of human, and possibly superhuman, reality, not bound by the constraints of mundane psychology.

To make a case for all this, one would have to plunge into the details of individual and thoroughly unrepeatable lives, study the pattern of deeds in the web of circumstances, and measure it against transcendent or nontranscendent frameworks. Take, for instance, the life of Padre Pio, the saintly friar who bore the stigmata for fifty years—wounds which vanished at death without a trace. Quite apart from the extraordinary phenomena associated with his name, one would also have to scrutinize the spiritual acts, the endless *prova* (see the *Diario* 1975): the struggle against internal 'demons'; against his own flock that suffocates him with demands and adoration; against persecution from certain of his own brethren within the Church; against lacerating bodily pains: yet amidst all this we observe a man able to remain centered on his tasks, faithful to his private visions, as well as to his vows and duties as a priest. Transcendent psi is called for, in my view, to account for such a life.

EXPERIMENTAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSCENDENT PSI

For an idea to be worth anything scientifically it must somehow be testable. This is a strict criterion, which is more readily applied in physics and chemistry. In the life sciences testable concepts are harder to come by. It might be possible to devise specific, quantitative types of experiment to test the idea of transcendent psi, but there is something else I want to call attention to here. The concept of transcendent psi might lead us to consider a *different type of experiment*. Let me end with an example.

PRAYER AND GOAL-DIRECTED THINKING

A principle I would adopt in trying to formulate this new kind of experiment is this: aim not for psi directly but aim for transcendence; no direct effort: rather, we stay on the lookout for psi as a piece of grace or serendipity—a *byproduct of a new relationship to the transcendent aspect of psi functioning*. One possible model for this would be experimental prayer.

People claim that when they pray, favorable coincidences begin to happen. We could think of prayer as a type of psi-mediated goal-directed thinking. What we might do is nothing at all but carefully attend to the goal, concentrate on an

image perhaps of the desired event. One might add a step—no doubt crucial to many—of invoking the assistance of the Transcendent, which, depending on one's cultural bias, would be invested with an appropriate form or image.

Traditionally, there are two kinds of prayer: petitionary and contemplative. In the first we desire some specific object; to help another, or obtain a favor for oneself. Here, any excess of egocentric striving would be self-defeating. In the second type of prayer we seek to unite with the Transcendent. There are many conceivable ways of conducting this type of experiment. The main thing would be the shift in goal, the new orientation to the transcendent function of psi. If indeed it should turn out that the main function of psi is transcendent, then such a path would also lead to increased psi manifestations.

It would not be easy to verify results the way we do in the physical or behavioral sciences. The idea of verification in a science of the spirit obviously calls for some thought. Perhaps 'verification' would include a transformation of attitude and life-style, a pattern of changes in the quality of a whole and completely individual, completely unrepeatable, life. One would need the methods of phenomenology to record such a venture in knowing.

Goal-oriented thinking, or prayer, needn't be thought of as displacing rational thinking in the art of living; only as a complementary mode. One could keep close tabs on events, measure periods of goal-oriented thinking sessions (procedures no doubt admitting of degrees of skill), try to impartially observe increases of favorable coincidences, unusual inner episodes, new forms of relationship, and so on. Such a type of experiment would no doubt admit all manner of self-deception and malobservation. But there is no need to rule out *a priori* the possibility of accumulating useful data and learning about psi processes—and what they might imply about the larger pattern of human reality. The defects in rigor and control would be compensated for by the increase in meaningfulness.

In my view, methods could be designed for testing the hypothesis of transcendent psi in the context of what we can call *experimental everyday life*. But my aim in this paper is to suggest that the notion of transcendent psi, far from being unempirical, might open doors to new forms of experimentation, forms that people in everyday life could make use of. Nonreligious people might be able to test such ideas in an experimental vein without disturbing, at least at first, their scientific worldview; religiously minded people could use transcendent psi to further explore and refine upon their worldview.

In order to gain recognition, psi research must prove its utility. So far one practical model of psi application has been developed which presupposes *direct* application of psi to particular problems or tasks: to crime detection, in healing, to the stock market, to business, etc. The method of practical application I am suggesting is based on a different principle—something that operates by indirection. It does not focus on specific problems but on altering one's workaday worldview and changing, or rather, adding a new mode of thinking, a new mode of interacting with things at large. The concept of transcendent psi offers a clue to exploring a new way of being in the world.

1422 River Road
Edgewater New Jersey 07020 U.S.A.

REFERENCES

- Agostino da S. Marco in Lamis. *Padre Pio da Pietrelcina: Diario*. San Giovanni Rotondo, 1975.
- Grosso, M. Padre Pio and the paranormal. *The Christian Parapsychologist* 1982, V. 4, N. 7., pp. 218-225.
- Honorton, C. Psi and internal attention states B. Wolman (Ed). *In Handbook of Parapsychology*. Van Nostrand: New York, 1977, pp. 435-472.
- Myers, F. *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*. Longmans: London, 1903. Vol. 2, p. 282.
- Rogo, D. S. *Miracles*. Dial Press: New York, 1982.
- Stevenson, I. Telepathic impressions: a review and report of thirty-five cases. *ProcASPR*, Vol. 29, 1970.
- Thurston, H. *Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*. Regnery: Chicago, 1952.
- Ullman, M. Dream, metaphor and psi. *RIP* 1983, 1984, 138-152.
- White, R. Saintly psi: a study of spontaneous ESP in saints, *Journal of Religion and Psychical Research*, 1981, Vol. 4, Nos. 3-4, 157-167.